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AUTHOR Buston, Beverley G.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Although marriage enrichment programs have been shown to be effective for many couples, a multidimensional approach to assessment is needed in investigating these groups. The components of information and social support in successful marriage enrichment programs were compared in a completely crossed 2 x 2 factorial design with repeated measures. Participants (N=72) were married couples assigned to one of four treatment groups: assessment only; unstructured, social support; information only; and structured group with information and support. Subjects completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships, and the Primary Communication Inventory, and were videotaped discussing a problem. Videotapes were coded using the Marital Interaction Coding System. The results showed that couples participating in treatment groups improved their marriages relative to those who underwent assessment only. Most of the effect seemed to be in increasing marital satisfaction and positive verbal behavior in couples who interacted with other couples. The information about marriage enrichment provided in the programs seemed to have little measurable effect. (NRB)

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A Component Analysis of Marriage Enrichment

Beverley G. Buston, Everett L. Worthington, Jr.,

and T. Michael Hammonds

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Running head: COMPONENT ANALYSIS

Paper presented at the meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, March 1985.

Abstract

Participants (N=72, 36 couples) volunteered for one of four marriage enrichment programs: (a) assessment only, (b) an unstructured, social support group, (c) an information only group and (d) a structured group with information and social support. As hypothesized, couples participating in treatment groups improved their marriage relative to those who underwent assessment only. Most of the effect seemed to be in increasing social intimacy and positive verbal behavior in couples who interacted with other couples. The information about marriage enrichment per se seemed to have little measurable effect. Implications for research and practice in marriage enrichment programs were discussed.

A Component Analysis of Marriage Enrichment

Marriage enrichment programs have been developed to assist couples who want to enhance their relationships and move toward greater fulfillment of their potential as a trusting, loving couple. Developing couples' ability to draw from within their marriage, using their own resources to initiate changes in their relationship is a shared goal in many marriage enrichment programs (Mace, 1979). In general, marriage enrichment programs share common characteristics. Most include an emphasis on open and direct exchange of feedback without emotional put-downs; acceptance of personal responsibility for what is said and done with the marriage; clarification and differentiation between thoughts and feelings; and willingness to examine options available in a given situation. The use of skill training programs to help couples communicate, negotiate, make decisions and solve problems is viewed as a preventative measure rather than as a therapeutic intervention (L'Abate, 1981).

Organized enrichment programs vary somewhat in the approaches used. The Minnesota Couples Communication Program (MCCP), Marriage Encounter, and Conjugal Relationship Enhancement (CRE) programs each provide structured information to couples within a group format. The couples interact around the structured information. The Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (ACME) convenes groups of couples who interact around given topics, but are given little or no structured information about the topics. L'Abate's

Structured Marriage Enrichment Programs involve a leader (or leader couple) giving structured information to couples individually.

Marriage enrichment programs have been shown to be effective for many couples; however, no research has investigated the effective components of marriage enrichment groups. Almost all research has been program evaluation/outcome research. Further, there is little explicit theorizing about what effective marriage enrichment is and how it might be measured. Each approach measures what it teaches. Most measures are global self-reports of happiness or marital adjustment. A multidimensional approach to assessment is needed in investigating these groups.

The present study explored two important components of successful marriage enrichment programs: information and social support. The study compared the two components in a completely crossed 2 X 2 factorial design (information or none X social support within a group or none) with repeated measures (pretreatment, posttreatment, and one month follow-up). Each component was examined separately and in combination, and all were compared to a control group, which received no treatment. It was hypothesized that each treated group would be more effective than the control group and that the group using both components would be more effective than groups using each component separately.

Method

Participants

Participants were married couples (N=36) recruited from

undergraduate psychology courses of Virginia Commonwealth University, as well as graduate students in medicine, seminary, Christian education, and law from surrounding colleges and universities in Richmond, Virginia. Because these schools have a large contingent of nontraditional students, the ages, socio-economic statuses, and backgrounds of the students more closely approximate people in the general population than samples drawn from most traditional universities. Couples were assigned to one of four marriage enrichment treatments (or control) depending on their availability at the times the treatments were offered.

Assessment

Couples were assessed individually by assessors who were blind to which group the couple belonged. The inventories completed by each participant were as follows: (a) the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976), (b) The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR, Olson & Schaeffer, no date), (c) The Primary Communication Inventory (PCI, Navran, 1967). Couples were also videotaped individually for seven minutes discussing a problem that had been previously rated independently by each spouse on the level of disagreement, frequency of discussion and importance. The Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS, Weider & Weiss, 1980) was used for coding the videotapes. Coders were blind to which program the couple belonged.

Descriptions of Treatment

Assessment only. These couples (n=10) participated in the same assessments as all other couples but received no treatment.

Social support only. Couples (n=6) in this program attended an ACME-type discussion group which was facilitated by trained leaders. They met one evening per week (2 hours per meeting) for three weeks. They discussed topics of concern to them, sharing problems, offering suggestions and solutions. The leaders facilitated discussions, offering few of their own suggestions and ensuring that everyone who wanted to share had the opportunity.

Structured information only. Couples (n=10) participating in this program met individually with a leader weekly for three weeks (one hour per session). Each week they viewed a 20-30 minute stimulus videotape giving structured information about marriage enrichment. The three videotapes covered (1) increasing intimacy (Barton & Alexander, 1981), (2) improving communication (Gottman, 1979), and (3) resolving conflict (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Gottman, 1979). The leader discussed the information with the couple and assigned homework. The homework was discussed at the beginning of each session. Because couples could discuss information with an individual counselor rather than having to share discussion time with other group members, the amount of contact was less than in the two groups.

Social support plus structured information. The couples (n=10) met for three weeks (2 hours per session). Each week they viewed the same videotapes providing the same structured information as the other group. In the remainder of the session, couples discussed the tape and reviewed the same homework assignment as assigned in the other instance. Homework was discussed at the beginning of each session.

Facilitators

The sessions were conducted by advanced doctoral students in Counseling Psychology. These leaders had been trained in group work and in working with couples. Additionally, they were supervised by a licensed psychologist who met with the leaders to discuss the groups and to plan strategies.

Results

Analysis of Treatment Effects

See Table 1 for the means and standard deviations for all dependent variables arranged by condition (information X social support X time).

Insert Table 1 about here

A 2 X 2 X 3 (S) [Information X Social support X Time (S)] multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with repeated measures was performed using the five subscales of the PAIR Inventory as the

dependent variables. The Hotelling-Lawley trace was used to approximate the F ratio. Only one multivariate interaction was significant (information X social support, $F(5, 63) = 2.96$, $p < .02$. Univariate ANOVA's revealed that although there were no significant differences on any dependent variable, the primary locus of the effect was in social intimacy, $F(1, 67) = 2.98$. $p < .10$. No effect was found for emotional, sexual, intellectual or recreational intimacy.

A 2 x 2 x 3 (S) MANOVA with repeated measures was performed using the two subscales of the PCI as the dependent variables, verbal and nonverbal communication. There was a significant multivariate interaction for social support x time $F(4, 268) = 3.68$, $p < .01$. Univariate ANOVA;s revealed that the locus of the effect was for verbal behavior, $F(2, 136) = 6.01$, $p < .003$. The groups that did have interactions with other couples began with lower levels of verbal behavior than the other couples, equaled the other couples at the end of the group and had higher levels of verbal behavior by the end of the one month follow-up. Groups without social support did not change over time.

A univariate ANOVA was performed on the measure of marriage adjustment, the DAS. There was a main effect for information $F(1, 68) = 31.15$, $p < .0001$, and a significant interaction for time x social support, $F(2, 136) = 3.35$, $p < .04$. Overall, couples not interacting in a group did not change in their ratings of

marital adjustment; however, couples who did interact in a group increased their marriage satisfaction over the duration of the group and maintained that level of satisfaction at follow-up.

Analysis of the data from the MICS is incomplete at the time of this writing.

Discussion

Component Analysis of Marriage Enrichment

This study explored the effects of information and social support in regard to marriage enrichment programs. Although more limited in time than most marriage enrichment programs, the six hours of treatment do appear to result in improving the marriages of couples participating relative to those assessed without treatment. Most of the effect seemed to be in increasing marital satisfaction and verbal communication behavior in couples who interacted with other couples. The specific information provided in the treatment appeared to have little measurable effect.

While the three types of treatment used were based on previous models of marriage enrichment programs, there have been few studies comparing the programs. Gorman and Kniskern (1977); Hof and Miller (1980); and Davis, Hovestadt, Piercy, and Cochan (1982) strongly recommend that research should be directed to the components of marriage enrichment programs responsible for relationship changes. According to Hof and Miller (1980) marital enrichment programs vary significantly in format and structure but most research done to

this point involves pre-post assessment with a treatment group and a control group.

A major theoretical base of the marriage enrichment process as stated by Hof and Miller (1980) is "the use of group process for providing a safe learning environment" (p. 1). Having an opportunity to share concerns and problems as well as sharing positive solutions with other couples in similar situations seems to be useful in enhancing the marital relationship. This concurs with Mace's (1979) belief that couples have the resources to help themselves. Sharing in groups allow these resources to be activated in helping couples improve their marriage. The structured teaching of communication skills helps couples talk to each other and to other couples. This appears to help couples increase their verbal behavior even after the group ceases to meet.

L'Abate's approach is to provide skill training in asserting personal communication, negotiating, problem solving, and decision making (1981) as a preventative measure for individual couples. Our study included L'Abate's approach in one treatment program having a weekly presentation for providing information on increasing intimacy, communication skills, and conflict resolution to individual couples during three weeks. Those couples receiving information did not change their marital satisfaction over the course of the study. In contrast, those not receiving information but participating in a group that shared their concerns with each other expressed more

marriage satisfaction over the course of treatment. The difference between the present study and L'Abate's approach include (a) his procedure of screening the couples to provide information relevant to their needs versus a structured program presented to all couples and (b) the length of the contact.

Some marriage enrichment programs meet as groups but do not utilize group process--spouses interact with each other but couples do not interact as a group. Although the present study does not address this case directly, the assumption is that such a group would function no better (if as well) as the information only format since it fails to use the group interaction as a resource. Such groups include the Pair Enrichment Program (PEP, Travis & Travis, 1975) and Marriage Encounter (Genovese, 1975).

Implications for Future Research

While the present study resulted in improvement of marriages of couples who participated relative to those experiencing assessment only, there are some obvious questions to be addressed in future research. Providing only information appeared to have little, if any, effect as presented in this design. As previously mentioned, the lack of screening for skills deficient in couples may have influenced this effectiveness. Couples who perceived their skills to be adequate for increasing intimacy, communication skills or conflict resolution may have tuned the information out. There may have been insufficient time for absorbing and integrating

the information presented in only three sessions. Due to time limitations, the information may also have been too sparse. Another consideration is the use of videotape for presenting information. This may have been perceived as impersonal, as lacking warmth, and as lacking the opportunity to build rapport or respond to the presenter. Finally, the information could have been presented in a number of ways--through lecture, through Socratic dialogue, through readings, through members of the group. The efficacy of each modality is at present unexplored.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in the design of the treatments was in the time frame. A total time exposure of six hours inhibits building rapport and trust with leaders and other participating couples. Adequate time appears to be a necessary element for self-disclosure, sharing of concerns, and building intimacy, especially in a group format. Even with homework there is little time for practicing and reinforcing new skills over three weeks.

In summary, despite the possible inadequacies of this study, there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that marriage enrichment programs might be effective not so much because of the information couples learn as because couples see other couples wrestling with similar difficulties, interact with others around the issues of marriage, learn through informal modeling, and are energized by group interaction.

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Author Notes

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Virginia Commonwealth University, Department of Psychology, 800 West Franklin Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0001.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations within Marriage Enrichment Programs Manipulating Information and Social Interaction

Intimacy in Marriage PAIR		No Information		Information	
		No social interaction (n=20)	Social interaction (n=12)	No social interaction (n=20)	Social interaction (n=20)
Emotional[a]					
pre	M	69.60	57.33	68.00	69.10
	SD	20.32	12.68	20.85	17.90
post	M	71.10	64.33	68.20	74.00
	SD	21.21	20.14	18.47	13.53
follow-up	M	71.20	70.00	69.20	75.00
	SD	21.03	12.00	18.36	17.21
Social[a]					
pre	M	58.00	66.00	65.00	65.20
	SD	18.51	17.44	20.10	21.60
post	M	61.20	63.33	69.60	65.20
	SD	18.40	14.46	17.62	21.60
follow-up	M	60.40	68.00	66.80	66.60
	SD	20.71	18.52	23.75	18.68

Table 1 (continued)

Means and Standard Deviations within Marriage Enrichment Programs Manipulating Information and Social Interaction

		No Information		Information	
Intimacy in Marriage PAIR		No social interaction (n=20)	Social interaction (n=12)	No social interaction (n=20)	Social interaction (n=20)
Sexual[b]					
pre	M	71.00	68.00	77.60	69.00
	SD	22.84	21.44	17.86	27.40
post	M	70.40	74.33	77.20	79.40
	SD	27.97	25.27	19.03	17.38
follow-up	M	70.40	71.92	80.30	81.00
	SD	28.94	21.17	16.87	18.20
Intellectual[a]					
pre	M	67.00	57.33	69.60	65.55
	SD	17.65	20.91	18.51	24.60
post	M	69.20	67.33	73.80	77.40
	SD	50.85	21.63	15.38	16.12
follow-up	M	70.60	66.25	69.90	75.10
	SD	19.30	16.46	16.66	17.34
Recreational[a]					
pre	M	67.35	62.33	75.20	72.35
	SD	20.09	15.29	18.83	15.66

Table 1 (continued)

Means and Standard Deviations within Marriage Enrichment Programs Manipulating Information and Social Interaction

		No Information		Information	
Intimacy in Marriage		No social	Social	No social	Social
PAIR		interaction	interaction	interaction	interaction
Recreational[a]		(n=20)	(n=12)	(n=20)	(n=20)
post	M	69.60	68.66	71.80	78.40
	SD	19.40	21.43	20.99	8.65
follow-up	M	71.40	67.25	73.80	78.60
	SD	17.85	22.03	18.05	12.39
Communication					
PCI					
Verbal[c]					
pre	M	67.75	66.59	70.05	66.90
	SD	9.48	6.81	7.13	5.95
post	M	68.00	68.83	70.55	68.90
	SD	9.85	8.20	6.81	5.51
follow-up	M	65.80	70.50	70.55	70.05
	SD	8.82	7.40	8.45	7.79
Nonverbal[d]					
pre	M	26.05	26.00	27.80	27.60
	SD	3.73	3.74	2.67	2.87

Table 1 (continued)

Means and Standard Deviations within Marriage Enrichment Programs Manipulating Information and Social Interaction

		No Information		Information	
Communication		No social	Social	No social	Social
PCI		interaction	interaction	interaction	interaction
Nonverbal[d]		(n=20)	(n=12)	(n=20)	(n=20)
post	M	27.05	27.75	27.15	27.40
	SD	3.53	2.25	2.43	2.24
follow-up	M	26.80	26.25	27.55	27.75
	SD	2.44	2.14	2.93	2.49
Marital Adjustment					
DAS[b,c]					
pre	M	139.80	125.75	119.95	119.35
	SD	16.54	15.40	12.88	19.96
post	M	143.60	136.66	119.50	121.30
	SD	17.32	15.21	12.62	12.87
follow-up	M	139.30	140.25	119.05	121.55
	SD	18.84	15.08	12.92	14.21

a. n.s.

b. significant for effect of time x social interaction $p < .01$

c. significant main effect for social interaction $p < .003$

d. significant for main effect of information at $p < .0001$

e. significant for effect of time x social interaction at $p < .03$